

Audie Murphy – The Spirit

By Stan Smith

During the last 30 years, I have come to know Audie Murphy, the soldier. I have also met over two hundred Medal of Honor recipients and understand their feelings. The Medal of Honor recipients are a cross section of society, coming from all walks of life. This includes privates, non-commissioned and commissioned officers including two and three star generals.

Like Audie, being a Medal of Honor recipient is a heavy and constant burden of responsibility. The burden of their legacy is that the Medal they faithfully earned is also the Medal for their buddies. They are the embodiment and personification of valor and self-sacrifice, and an inspiration for all Americans. For one to live and receive the Medal of Honor certainly means being in the right place at the right time, a good deal of pure luck, and the tenacity to carry out your mission in the face of overwhelming odds, truly above and beyond the call of duty. Many good men were never to be so honored. I am certain you will concur that, in truth, the real heroes were the ones who did not come back; indeed, uncommon valor was a common virtue.

Meeting a recipient for the first time, one would see only a nonassuming, humble, gentle individual who resembles nothing like the hero image conceived in our mind's eye. They are like anyone else only they did a job they were trained to do, no more and no less than many others who served.

Audie was deeply embarrassed by his medals. He wanted to be recognized for his acting ability and song writing talent. Audie was adamant; his medals belonged to his men. When visiting American cemeteries in Southern France, he remarked, "If there be any glory in war, let it rest with men like these." Other Medal of Honor recipients are very humble about their awards. They wear their awards proudly but are the first to admit they wear them for their men, the men who didn't come home.

It was said by a recipient J. Elliott Williams, "It is harder to wear the Medal than to earn it." To be thrust into the national light with hero status is difficult to handle as Audie learned. This, indeed, is a Herculean task. Many feel they must live up to certain standards of conduct least they bring dishonor upon the Medal.

If a job called for one man, Audie would use himself; there was no need to risk more men. This is a quality of a good leader; to always lookout for the welfare of your men. And this is the way it was on January 26, 1945 when he ordered his out numbered company to rear positions, and alone, called in artillery upon his position while shooting at the Germans with his carbine. After depleting his ammunition, he then mounted the M-10 tank and raised havoc with the Germans. It was for this action that Audie was awarded the Medal of Honor. This took place on June 2, 1945 at an airfield adjacent to Werfen Castle in Werfen Austria by Lt. Gen. Alexander M. Patch, Commander, 7th Corps, who presented the medal to a very shy, freckled face, Audie Murphy.

There is a great deal of humility among these men. They do not view themselves as heroes; they merely were doing the job they were trained for. Indeed, they happened to be in the right place at the right time and it was up to them to respond to a desperate situation. In the heat of combat when you have a split second to act, one does not think of medals but only of the task at hand. Moreover, they felt that they didn't do anymore than many others who perhaps went unrecognized for their acts.

Also, there is a sense of guilt associated with the Medal. Perhaps had it not been for a comrade getting killed by drawing the enemy's fire first, and then this particular individual couldn't have achieved his deed of valor. Had it not been for the man's squad or unit which participated in this action, a team effort, this soldier might not have been recognized. Heroes like Audie Murphy felt that their medals belonged to their men and that the true heroes were those with wooden crosses, for they did not return home. Many recipients have the responsibility and self-imposed burden of wearing their Medal in tribute to their buddies.

Coupled with the guilt is the strain of living up to standards of conduct and behavior not to bring shame or disgrace upon the Medal. As a Medal of Honor recipient, often in the public light, one has to exercise nearly saintly traits. This burden of conduct oftentimes exceeds the lifestyles and capabilities of the individual.